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->From the Editor’s Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
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Well, so much for 2008 being a good year. If you’re like most people, when the new year comes around, you tend to hope that it’s better than the previous one. It’s only natural - unless you had one helluva previous year!

The good news is that I’m still here. I almost wasn’t. There was a skirmish between my Ford Explorer and a Dodge pick-up truck. The Explorer lost, big-time! I was on my way home from running a few errands (the "kids" just have to have their MilkBone biscuits!), and I had stopped off to do some shooting since I was fairly nearby. Anyway, I was TWO houses from home, when the driver of the truck wasn’t paying too much attention to the road, and ran a stop sign. Unfortunately, I was almost through that intersection when he rammed me. I saw him out of the corner of my eye, and knew that there was absolutely nothing that I could do.

Once I realized that I was still alive, and somehow thought it prudent to put my truck in park and shut off the engine, I shook out some of the shock and anger. I couldn’t open my door, so I managed to climb over the center console to get to the passenger side door. It was stuck, but I didn’t know why. I got that door open, and realized why it was stuck. Apparently the force of the impact was so hard that it tossed my truck sideways far enough to hit a telephone pole, and my truck then bounced back onto the road. From the tips of both doors, all the way to the back of each side of the truck, lay a mangled mess of metal, plastic, and glass. The electric company had to come out and brace the pole because it was splintered, but still standing.

No injuries to either of us, fortunately (luckily?). I managed to think to call the police to take a report. They called to have my truck towed away because it couldn’t be driven - the drive shaft was severed or pulled apart. I still can’t believe it.

So, now I wait for all of the red tape to unfold, and see where we’re left. Just another of those unexpected expenses that you can’t really plan on. And still being on the rolls of the unemployed doesn’t make things any better!

So, why am I boring all of you with my problems? Well, I guess it’s sort of a first-person account of being able to count your blessings. I guess it’s a way of reflection that regardless of how badly things may be going for each of us, things could be worse. What would you all do if you didn’t have me around to drive you crazy week after week?

Until next time (hopefully!)...

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - Guinness Book of Game Records!
"""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""" Interactive Achievement Awards!
Central Park for the People?

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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!
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Guinness To Release Book of Game Records

Yes, Billy Mitchell is still the king of Kong.

In the first "Gamer's Edition" of Guinness World Records, due out March 11, Mitchell, of Hollywood, Fla., ranks as the top-scoring player of the arcade version of "Donkey Kong."

Mitchell's score is 0.1 percent ahead of Steve Wiebe of Redmond, Wash., whose quest to unseat Mitchell was the subject of the 2007 documentary "The King of Kong: A Fistful of Quarters."

Other highlights of the Gamer's Edition 2008:

* The biggest-selling video game of all time is "Super Mario Bros.," released by Nintendo Co. in 1985. It sold 40.2 million copies (though some were bundled with Nintendo systems).

* The highest one-day gross for a game is $170 million at the U.S. "Halo 3" launch on Sept. 25, 2007.

* The controversial crime-adventure series "Grand Theft Auto" has the most guest stars in a video game series. Its 339 voice actors include Dennis Hopper, Samuel L. Jackson, Ray Liotta and Ice T.

* The largest virtual beer festival takes place once a year in "World of Warcraft." The online game's two warring factions share a truce along with the brews.

For the record, Wiebe did manage to beat Mitchell's 1985 score in "Donkey Kong," but his top rank stood for just four months before the colorful Mitchell struck back with a score of 1,050,200.

Unmentioned in the movie was the fact that the record-holder when Wiebe

started his attempt was not Mitchell but Timothy Sczerby of Auburn, N.Y. He had beaten Mitchell’s 1985 record in 2000. Sczerby is listed in the Guinness book as the current No. 3, but his name is misspelled in the advance copy obtained by the Associated Press.

To keep score for "Donkey Kong" and a variety of other classic games, Guinness relied on Iowa-based Twin Galaxies, which started out in the 80s as an arcade chain but soon turned into national scoreboard and referee organization for electronic games.

Twin Galaxies supplied the Guinness Book of World Records with video-game scores in the 80s, but Guinness stopped using them in 1988, as the arcade gaming craze started to subside.

1st-Person Shooting Games Win Top Honors

Three critically acclaimed first-person shooters won top honors at the video game industry’s most prestigious awards show.

"BioShock," "Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare" and "The Orange Box" garnered four prizes apiece Thursday night at the 11th annual Interactive Achievement Awards.

"Call of Duty," praised for its unique online multiplayer leveling system, was named overall game of the year and console game of the year. It was also honored as the top action and online game. It features an intense single-player mission revolving around global terror as well as a diverse set of multiplayer modes.

"BioShock," which had a record-setting 12 nominations, won awards for art direction, story development, music and sound.

"The Orange Box," a compilation of five distinct games, was named computer game of the year. Its mind-bending physics puzzler, "Portal," was honored for game design, character performance and game play engineering.

The awards were handed out by the Academy of Interactive Arts & Sciences at the D.I.C.E. (Design Innovate Communicate Entertain) Summit. Winners were selected by panels of engineers, designers and others in the industry.

Winners in other categories included:

Innovation in Gaming: "Rock Band."

Handheld Game: "The Legend of Zelda: Phantom Hourglas."

Massively Multiplayer Game: "World of Warcraft: The Burning Crusade."

Cellular Game: "skate."

Role-Playing Game: "Mass Effect."

Racing Game: "MotorStorm."

Adventure Game: "Super Mario Galaxy."

Sports Game: "skate."

Strategy-simulation Game: "Command and Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars."

Family Game: "Rock Band."

Downloadable Game: "Puzzle Quest: Challenge of the Warlords."

Animation: "Assassin’s Creed."

Visual Engineering: "Crysis."

Soundtrack: "Rock Band."

They Said Central Park Was for the People ... They Lied

Atari, Inc. today announced the launch of the official website for the upcoming action survival game Alone in the Dark, featuring a series of fascinating and intriguing facts, legends and stories which reveal the strange and unexplained happenings which have dogged the history of New York’s magnificent municipal parkland, Central Park. Visitors to the site www.CentralDark.com <http://www.CentralDark.com> will begin a journey into the murky past of New York’s backyard and see how the park’s chequered history has influenced and inspired the production of Alone in the Dark.

With new facts and park lore scheduled every two weeks up to launch of the game in May, visitors can already learn a great deal of incongruous facts drawn from historical documentation, newspapers, and the work of scholars, all of which suggests there’s more than meets the eye behind the design and perfect preservation of this enormous parkland in the city that never sleeps. The implication is that considerably different motives were at work than just the desire to create a grand public parkland for the people of New York. Here’s just a taste of the questions posed:

-- Why was the soil that was used to construct Central Park not from New Jersey as recorded, and according to microchemical analysis not even from America?
-- What were the suspected political motivations behind the complete decimation of Seneca village, Manhattan’s first African American community, during the park’s construction?
-- In a city with debts of $4.8 Billion, who has the power to ensure that Central Park’s $528 Billion of prime Manhattan real estate has remained completely untouched since its creation?
-- Who built the existing tunnel network under the park that was used for Oppenheimer’s Manhattan Project of 1853 that led to the creation of the atomic bomb?

Featuring a gripping story, design inspired by contemporary TV action dramas, and original gameplay based on real world rules physics, Eden Games’ action survival opus Alone in the Dark is currently scheduled for release in May 2008 for Xbox 360 video game and entertainment system from Microsoft, PlayStation2 computer entertainment system, Wii and PC with the PlayStation3 computer entertainment system version following later in 2008.

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Time Warner to Split AOL Internet Business

Time Warner plans to split up the Internet access and audience businesses of its AOL segment to run them each independently, Time Warner CEO and President Jeff Bewkes revealed Wednesday.

The move comes as little surprise, as former CEO Dick Parsons acknowledged in September that Time Warner would at some point divest itself from the AOL access business, though he made no commitment to do so at the time.

On Bewkes' first quarterly financial conference call Wednesday since taking his position as CEO on Jan. 1, he said Time Warner's plans to split AOL's businesses will help hasten the segment's business-model transition from "a declining ISP subscription business to a growing Internet ad business."

"This should significantly increase AOL's strategic options for each of these main business sectors," Bewkes said on a call to reveal Time Warner's fourth-quarter 2007 earnings. He made a distinction between AOL's for-fee Internet-access service and its ad-supported audience business, which includes AOL's online services and content.

Bewkes did not give a specific timeline or other details for when and how the split will occur. AOL's Internet-access business, which still provides for-fee service, continues to decline in subscribers even as Bewkes noted that Time Warner has reduced operating expenses at AOL by "well over a billion dollars."

Still, even as AOL's goal is to become a viable online advertising competitor against Google, Yahoo and Microsoft - the latter two of which may soon become a single and more formidable rival - advertising revenue for AOL has been growing less than the industry average for several quarters.

In the fourth quarter, ad revenue at AOL grew 18 percent, less than the current International Advertising Bureau's industry average of 25 percent. As a point of comparison, Google's ad revenue grew 51 percent in its fiscal fourth quarter.

AOL's ad revenue growth was below industry average for both its 2007 second and third quarters as well. It grew 13 percent in the third quarter, which ended Sept. 30, and 16 percent in the second quarter, which ended June 30. The industry average was around 26 percent for those time periods.

Time Warner's financial results for the quarter overall met Wall Street expectations, but net income was down for the quarter. The company reported $1.03 billion, or $0.28 a share, for the fourth quarter, down

from $1.75 billion, or $0.44, last year. However, the results for the fourth quarter of fiscal 2006 were bolstered by an income-tax benefit as well as income from the sale of AOL Internet access businesses in the U.K. and France.

Quarterly revenue rose 2.4 percent, from $12.34 billion in the year-ago quarter to $12.64 billion, reported Wednesday.

Bewkes on Wednesday also outlined other cost-cutting and strategic measures that Time Warner plans to take to make the business run more effectively. The company's AOL business is not the only one that will be affected; the company also is considering reducing its investments in its Time Warner Cable business, he said.

Google Ramps Up Office Challenge

Google today launched a spiffed-up version of Google Apps, its free Office-like suite of programs. This follows by two days its introduction of a new e-mail management service. Both are tailored for small businesses, schools and non-profit agencies.

Normally, these moves would draw scant notice. But as Microsoft tries to absorb Yahoo - the better to make inroads into Internet advertising - Google is moving ahead with initiatives to claw its way onto Microsoft turf. "What we have here are two behemoths eyeing each other's core revenue streams," says Rob Koplowitz, principal analyst at Forrester Research.

Microsoft and Yahoo could face months of distractions wrangling over the proposed merger. That leaves Google opportunity to advance initiatives in promising arenas such as online business services.

On Tuesday, it launched an e-mail management service that filters out spam and secures sensitive documents. The technology - which can work with Microsoft e-mail and business servers widely used by small businesses - came via Google's acquisition 13 months ago of messaging company Postini for $625 million.

Google hopes to get small organizations accustomed to turning to Google for Internet-supplied e-mail screening, then move them into messaging, calendars and word processing. "We think once customers are comfortable with the e-mail security, along with archiving and search functionalities, they would then start using Google Apps, too," says Sundar Raghavan, Google Apps product manager and a former Postini vice president.

Today, the search giant is introducing Google Apps Team Edition, designed to make it easy for groups of employees or students to collaborate using a free suite of messaging, word-processing, spreadsheet and slide-presentation programs.

"Google has its spoon in a lot of pots," says Rebecca Wettemann, analyst at tech consultants Nucleus Research. "But they still need to show they can be a trusted vendor to small businesses and enterprises."

Meanwhile, the search giant has closure of its own to bring to its $3 billion acquisition of Internet ad agency DoubleClick, still under review

by European antitrust regulators. DoubleClick is readying technology that would make it much easier for website publishers to sell display ad space on all of their Web pages. Microsoft and Yahoo have separately been trying to do something similar.

"Google should concentrate on moving forward with its vision for DoubleClick," says Kevin Lee, founder of search consultants Didit.

Antivirus Developers Team to Set Test Standards

Antivirus software companies and software testers created a new organization Monday with the goal of providing consistent information about the effectiveness of antivirus products.

The distribution of malware - including viruses, worms, Trojan Horses, and Web sites exploiting weaknesses in Internet browsers - is now being driven by organized crime for financial gain, and poses an ever more serious threat.

Anti-malware software developers have developed methods to block these threats, but traditional antivirus tests are becoming irrelevant because they don’t take such methods into account, according to Stuart Taylor of anti-malware software vendor Sophos.

Last year, developers of antivirus software called into question a batch of antivirus tests conducted by independent organizations when showed their products failing to detect many security threats. At a meeting in Reykjavik, Iceland, last May, representatives of F-Secure, Panda Software and Symantec decided to design a new testing plan.

The creation of the Anti-Malware Testing Standards Organization (AMTSO) is one of the fruits of that work. It brings together around 40 developers and testers of anti-malware tools, with the aim of hosting discussions about testing, publicizing testing standards, and providing tools and resources for such testing.

Organizations present at the inaugural meeting included antivirus software testers such as AV-Comparatives and AV-Test.org, and antivirus software developers including BitDefender, F-Secure, Kaspersky Lab, McAfee, Sophos, Symantec, Trend Micro and Panda Software, which hosted the meeting. IBM and Microsoft also attended.

Tech CEOs Push for Green Computing

IT vendors can play a major role in reducing the world’s energy consumption, but information about the benefits of technology has been lacking in an ongoing environmental debate in Washington, D.C., three tech CEOs said Wednesday.

While IT consumption of energy in the U.S. has grown in the last decade, technology also displaces more than its share of energy-consuming activities in other sectors, members of the Technology CEO Council said. The advocacy group highlighted a report, released Wednesday, saying that every kilowatt hour of energy used by IT replaces 10 kilowatt hours of

energy that would have been used elsewhere.

IT currently uses about 6 percent of U.S. electricity, up from 2 percent to 3 percent in 2000, said John "Skip" Laitner, co-author of the report and director of economic policy analysis at the American Council for an Energy-Efficient Economy (ACEEE). But through a wide variety of IT products, including tech that enables video conferencing, telecommuting and e-mail, technology results in a net decrease in energy consumption, he said.

Instead of flying to a conference in Sweden recently, Laitner attended by video conference, he said. And in preparing the ACEEE's report, Laitner received thousands of pages of documents by e-mail or downloads, instead of having them delivered.

Few studies have explored the energy efficiencies created by IT, he added. "We have to look at what that's displacing," he said.

Users of computers and other tech products should expect more energy savings in the future, said Dell CEO Michael Dell. He joined Mike Splinter, president and CEO of Applied Materials, and Joe Tucci, chairman, president and CEO of EMC, at a press briefing focused on green technologies.

"As an industry, we have begun to take up the [environmental] issue in a serious way," Dell said. "It's an issue that customers care about."

The IT industry has come under some criticism for its energy use, particularly at large data centers. In January 2007, U.S. Senator Wayne Allard, a Colorado Republican, introduced a bill that would require the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to analyze and report to Congress about the growth and energy consumption of computer data centers by the federal government and private companies.

Congress needs to "more fully understand the impact that the growing number of computers in use throughout the country has on energy consumption," Allard said then.

The Technology CEO Council isn't concerned about congressional mandates, because the IT industry is already taking steps to reduce its energy consumption, said Bruce Mehlman, the group's executive director.

But the U.S. government has a huge impact on energy consumption by adopting more green technologies, said Applied Materials' Splinter. "The government is the largest user of energy in our country," he said.

In addition to the ACEEE report, the Technology CEO Council released its own report, called A Smarter Shade of Green. The report lays out the group's environmental policy principles, including:

* The president should select a federal agency as a center for energy efficiency excellence, a model for other agencies going green.

* The government should invest more in green research.Governments across the world should reduce tariffs on green technologies.The U.S. government should explore tax incentives for deploying energy-saving technologies.

* Companies shouldn't wait for government mandates or incentives, but should adopt energy-efficient strategies on their own.

Yahoo May Consider Google Alliance

Yahoo Inc would consider a business alliance with Google Inc as one way to rebuff a $44.6 billion takeover proposal by Microsoft, a source familiar with Yahoo’s strategy said on Sunday.

Yahoo management is considering revisiting talks it held with Google several months ago on an alliance as an alternative to Microsoft’s bid, that source said. At $31 a share, Yahoo believes the bid undervalues the company, two sources said.

A second source close to Yahoo said it had received a procession of preliminary contacts by media, technology, telephone and financial companies. But the source said they were unaware whether any alternative bid was in the offing.

In a memo to Yahoo employees on Friday, which was obtained by Reuters on Sunday, Yahoo leaders wrote: "We want to emphasize that absolutely no decisions have been made - and, despite what some people have tried to suggest, there’s certainly no integration process underway."

Few natural bidders exist besides Google that could engage in a bidding war, and Google would be unlikely to win approval from antitrust regulators, some Wall Street analysts said on Friday.

The Wall Street Journal reported on its Web site on Sunday that Google’s chief executive Eric Schmidt called Yahoo’s chief executive Jerry Yang to offer his company’s help in any effort to thwart Microsoft’s bid.

Spokesmen for Yahoo and Google declined comment. Google was not immediately available for comment on the WSJ story.

Yahoo’s efforts to find an alternative bidder could simply be a measure to pressure Microsoft to boost its bid, which valued Yahoo at $44.6 billion when first announced on Friday.

Sanford C. Bernstein analyst Jeffrey Lindsay wrote in a research note that "the Microsoft bid of $31 is very astute" because it puts pressure on Yahoo management to take actions that could unlock the underlying value of Yahoo assets, which he estimates are worth upward of $39-$45 a share.

The bid gave a boost to markets in Asia when they opened on Monday. Shares in Softbank Corp soared as much as 16 percent and Yahoo Japan was untraded due to a flood of buy orders on Monday, on hopes a potential deal between Microsoft and Yahoo would boost the Japanese firms’ competitiveness. Softbank holds a 3.9 percent stake in Yahoo Inc in terms of voting rights.

The benchmark Nikkei average ended the morning up 2.4 percent while indexes in Shanghai, Hong Kong, South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore also gained.

Separately, Google fired back on Sunday at Microsoft Corp’s bid to acquire Yahoo, accusing Microsoft of seeking to extend its computer software monopoly deeper into the Internet realm.

David Drummond, a Google chief legal officer, said in a blog post that the combination of Microsoft and Yahoo could undermine competition on the Web and called on policy makers to challenge the combination.

Microsoft responded to Google's arguments by saying that a merger with Yahoo would create a "compelling number two competitor for Internet search and online advertising" to market leader Google.

"The alternative scenarios only lead to less competition on the Internet," Microsoft General Counsel Brad Smith said in a statement.

Drummond argued that Microsoft's power stems from decades-old monopolies in Windows - the software operating system used to control most personal computers - and Internet Explorer, which is the dominant browser consumers used to view the Web.

Microsoft's proposed merger with Yahoo would combine the No. 1 and No. 2 suppliers of Web-based e-mail, instant messaging (IM) and portals, which act as starting points for hundreds of millions of users seeking information on the Web.

"Could a combination of the two take advantage of a PC software monopoly to unfairly limit the ability of consumers to freely access competitors' email, IM, and Web-based services?" Drummond said in a blog at http://googleblog.blogspot.com/.

In making its case for the deal during a conference call on Friday, Microsoft executives said Google - not Microsoft - was the one company antitrust regulators were likely to bar from buying Yahoo, based on Google's dominance in Web search.

Microsoft executives cited industry data showing Google has a 75 percent share of worldwide Web search revenue. Collectively, Yahoo and Microsoft attract around 20 percent of Web searches, Internet measurement firms show.

"Today, Google is the dominant search engine and advertising company on the Web," Smith said in replying to Google on Sunday. "Google has amassed about 75 percent of paid search revenues worldwide and its share continues to grow."

A person familiar with Google's thinking said the company believes Microsoft is using the same playbook it did in the 1990s to switch Windows users away from Web browser pioneer Netscape Communications to its own Internet Explorer.

"It is the same old story," the source said.

Microsoft Rolls Out Vista Upgrade, Server 2008

Following a flurry of Web reports, Microsoft confirmed Monday that the much-anticipated Service Pack 1 (SP1) for Microsoft's Windows Vista operating system will ship today to manufacturers along with Windows Server 2008.

Chief Executive Steve Ballmer made the announcement this morning in a presentation to analysts, according to Reuters and other sources. For

Vista, he said, "we think we are turning the corner in terms of enterprise adoption and deployment and we think Service Pack will be a big boon." Server 2008 had been scheduled to be officially launched at the end of February.

The release of SP1 was also confirmed with a posting today on the Windows Vista blog. Vice President Mike Nash wrote that he has been running Vista with SP1 for a few months and he's noticed his systems "run faster and more reliably than they did with the 'Gold' release of Windows Vista."

For instance, he said, copying or moving files on a PC, a home network or a corporate network "should now be much faster - up to 50 percent faster in some scenarios." He also noted that resuming a task from sleep is faster with SP1. Microsoft has said that SP1 is designed to increase the performance, reliability and compatibility of Vista.

Nash also outlined the distribution "ecosystem." Within the coming months, he said, new versions of Vista with SP1 will be available and original-equipment manufacturers will start producing PCs with SP1 preinstalled. He added that the rollout to existing Vista customers will be "approximately concurrent" with the availability of SP1 on new PCs.

SP1 will be available through Windows Update and the download center at Microsoft.com by mid-March, which, Nash said, will give the company time to work with hardware manufacturers to adjust device-drive installations. He said Microsoft's analysis is that the difficulties between drivers and Vista came from the installation of the drivers, not the drivers themselves. "If Windows Update determines that the system has one of the drivers we know to be problematic, then Windows Update will not offer SP1," Nash wrote.

By mid-April, SP1 will be available to users who have chosen to have updates delivered automatically. Updates for drivers will also be automatically installed, thus "unblocking" those systems from receiving SP1 because of problematic drivers.

Mark Margevicius, a director at industry research firm Gartner, described Server 2008's predecessor, Server 2003, as "one of Microsoft's most successful platforms, in terms of market presence and being a good OS." He added that all indications were that Server 2008 will build on that, with incremental improvements for Active Directory, terminal services and other functions, and new support for areas such as virtualization.

"It's like buying the latest model of a great car or truck," he said.

But Margevicius did not extend the automotive analogy to Windows Vista, even with SP1. He said its predecessor, Windows XP, "is a very, very good operating system already, and the feedback we're getting is that there is not a major reason to upgrade."

There has been speculation that SP1 would provide the stability that would lead more businesses to adopt Vista, but Margevicius said he doesn't expect SP1 to change the perception that there is no compelling reason to switch.

Video Chat Software Introduces Recording

A new version of video chat software ooVoo released this week allows users to record chats, perhaps to post them to video-sharing sites like YouTube or just to keep them for posterity.

The free software from New York-based ooVoo is a video-oriented competitor to eBay Inc.’s Skype. It allows video conferencing with up to six participants, while Skype supports only two-party video calls and is more focused on voice communication.

Skype video can be recorded through third-party programs.

Apple Inc.’s iChat does multiparty video chats, and a recording feature was introduced with Leopard, the company’s latest operating system.

The new 1.5 version of ooVoo also adds features found in other chat programs: visual effects and the ability to call U.S. phones. The first two hours of calls are free. The company hasn’t said how it plans to charge for additional calling.

Recording of calls without the knowledge of all participants is illegal in many U.S. states so the program notifies participants that they are being recorded.

Oovoo is available for Windows PCs only. A Macintosh version is in the works.

Google Selling More E-mail Security

Google Inc. is adding more e-mail security and storage products for businesses, sharpening its aim on a Microsoft Corp. stronghold while the competition between the two rivals also heats up in Internet search and advertising.

The tools to be introduced Tuesday build upon technology that Google acquired last year when it bought e-mail specialist Postini Inc. for $625 million. The package of products are designed to weed out junk mail and potential viruses as well as protect against leaks of confidential information sent through e-mail. Google also is offering to retain e-mail data for longer periods.

Google bought Postini largely to address concerns that its corporate e-mail service lacked adequate security and compliance measures.

All the latest features are compatible with Microsoft Exchange as well as Lotus Notes and Novell Groupwise. Prices will range from $3 per user to $25 per user, depending on how much protection and data retention a customer wants.

Google’s push into business software, launched in 2006, looms as a threat to Microsoft, which derives much of its profit from the sale of its more expensive Office suite of software applications as well as its e-mail programs.

Meanwhile, Microsoft hopes to close the gap with Google in the lucrative Internet search and advertising market by buying their common rival, Yahoo Inc., for more than $40 billion.

If Yahoo accepts the unsolicited offer and the deal is approved by antitrust regulators, Microsoft would increase its share of the worldwide search market to about 16 percent, up from 3 percent currently, according to comScore Media Metrix. Google's share stands at 62 percent.

Without providing a breakdown, Google says hundreds of thousands of businesses, government agencies and schools already use its software applications. That includes users of free programs that are less sophisticated than the ones sold in a subscription package.

One Internet Cut Explained, But Four Others Still A Mystery

A ship's anchor severed one undersea Internet cable damaged last week, it was revealed on Thursday amid ongoing outages in the Middle East and South Asia, but mystery shrouds what caused another four reported cuts.

There has been speculation that five cables being cut in almost as many days was too much of a coincidence and that sabotage must have been involved.

India's Flag telecom said in a statement that the cut to the Falcon cable between the United Arab Emirates and Oman "is due to a ship anchor... an abandoned anchor weighing five to six tonnes was found."

Flag - part of India's Reliance Communications - said repair work on the cable which broke on February 1 was continuing despite rough weather, and it was expected to be completed by Sunday.

The company said repairs to its other Flag Europe Asia cable, one of two that were cut off Egypt's Mediterranean coast, were continuing and would also be complete by Sunday.

Technicians aboard the repair ship were using remotely operated submarine vehicles to check the damage, but the company did not say what caused the cut.

There was no immediate word on the state of repairs to the second severed Mediterranean cable, SEA-ME-WE4.

The damage to the first three cables caused widespread disruption to Internet and international telephone services in Egypt, Gulf Arab states and South Asia.

A fourth cable linking Qatar to the United Arab Emirates was then also damaged causing yet more disruption, telecommunication provider Qtel said.

Earlier reports said that the damage had been caused by ships that had been diverted from their usual route because of bad weather.

But Egypt has already excluded ships as the cause of damage to the Mediterranean cables thanks to footage recorded by onshore video cameras of the location of the cables which showed no traffic in the area when the damage occurred.

Yet another Gulf cable was reportedly cut, the Khaleej Times said on

Tuesday, but there have been suggestions that one break had been counted twice.

The head of Qatar's telecoms regulator, Hessa al-Jaber, said in press reports that she doubted the damage was deliberate.

The Qatari telecoms firm Qtel told AFP the line was being fixed and that services should return to normal within days.

With so many cables cut, speculation has risen as to whether the outages, unprecedented in the region, were coincidence or something more nefarious.

"So many incidents happening in one region, whether it is a coincidence is a moot question," said R.S Perhar, secretary of the Internet Service Providers' Association of India.

"The coincidence of so many cables snapping does raise doubts about why this is happening. It needs to be answered."

He said that many Internet service providers were still only "getting 30-40 percent bandwidth."

Some blamed companies' failure to provide backup systems for the outages.

"Many companies don't spend on restoration and protection work. They don't build alternative cable networks. That's why these problems happen," said a spokesman for an Indian telecom service provider on condition he not be named.

Bloggers have speculated that the cutting of so many cables in a matter of days is too much of a coincidence and must be sabotage.

Theories include a US-backed bid to cut off arch-foe Iran's Internet access, terrorists piloting midget submarines or "vengeful militant dolphins."

An earthquake off the coast of Taiwan in December 2006 snapped several undersea cables and hit Internet access across Asia, but no unusual seismic activity has been reported in the Middle East in recent days.

eBay Sellers Split on Changes

The significant changes that eBay announced last week have merchants abuzz as they analyze and react to the impact that the restructured fees, modification of the search and feedback functions, and other changes will have on their sales and profits.

Of particular interest have been the proposed changes to fees, which involve lowering the cost of listing items and increasing the commission eBay gets when products are sold. There has also been much discussion in blogs and discussion forums of eBay's plan to forbid sellers from leaving negative feedback for buyers.

While merchants are split on the potential benefits and disadvantages of the changes, there seems to be a general consensus that, whether one supports them or not, the changes represent a major attempt on eBay's

part to alter the way that the marketplace works.

"It’s clear eBay is taking it really seriously that they have to improve the buyer experience, and they’re laying the groundwork for getting aggressive about doing it," said Jonathan Garriss, executive director of the Professional eBay Sellers Alliance (PESA), a group of large sellers that has often been highly critical of eBay.

Garriss, also CEO of Gotham City Online, an apparel store on eBay that also has its own site, hopes that the proposed changes will be a first step of others that eBay will take to fix what PESA considers key problems with the marketplace, such as making the buyer experience more convenient and streamlined.

To that end, Garriss is encouraged by the proposed incentives to reward merchants who provide superior customer service by giving all qualifying merchants preferred placement in search engine results and offering PowerSellers additional fee discounts based on their customer ratings.

"We don’t want to lose sight of the health of the marketplace, and the changes eBay is making are absolutely in the right direction," Garriss said in a phone interview.

While he supports the concept of lowering insertion fees and shifting them to the commission, he recognizes that, as proposed, the fee restructuring will greatly hurt some merchants, particularly, in his view, those that sell lower-priced items in high volume via auctions. Garriss hopes that eBay will take this into consideration and possibly adjust the fee changes before rolling them out in a few weeks in the U.S.

Lisa Witt, an eBay PowerSeller for eight years, says the fee changes will not have much of an impact on her bottom line. A seller of fine jewelry, Witt says the listing fees will remain too high even under the new fee structure.

"They need to dramatically change the fee structure if they expect seller growth on the site. eBay should have a flat rate listing fee and it should be the same amount across the board for everyone, and that listing fee should be low," she wrote in an e-mail interview. "A monthly fee for unlimited listings on eBay would work well too."

Witt is against the plan to forbid sellers from leaving negative feedback about buyers. This change may lead to buyers using the threat of negative feedback as an extortion tactic to get extras, she said. Buyers may also be disinclined to contact sellers if a disagreement arises, resorting simply to leaving negative feedback, she added. "Feedback is voluntary and should be able to be left by either party as they see fit," Witt said.

Meanwhile, John Lawson, another PowerSeller and owner of 3rd Power Outlet, is generally positive about the proposed changes. "There’ll be some bumpy roads, but they’re on a path to make this marketplace more vibrant," Lawson said in a phone interview.

3rd Power Outlet, which sells urban wear and accessories and makes about 80 percent of its sales via eBay, will save about 50 percent in listing fees and, factoring in the increased commission, will have net savings in eBay costs of about 30 percent, Lawson said.

"It’ll have a nice impact on our eBay costs. It’s extra money in our pockets," Lawson said. While not a major windfall, the savings will allow him to add more listings and do more auctions, he said.

Forbidding sellers from leaving negative feedback about buyers is a good move because, as eBay officials have argued, some sellers have used negative feedback to retaliate against buyers, he said. "A seller doesn’t have to leave any comment about buyers at all," Lawson said. "The buyer has to be satisfied and must have the ability to leave a true comment."

Still, he’s not crazy about new proposed fee discounts to PowerSellers based on them attaining certain levels of DSR (Detailed Seller Rating). For example, he finds that it’s off the mark for eBay to have a specific DSR category for shipping and handling, because, as a rule, no one likes to pay for this portion of the transaction. Merchants like himself, who sell to buyers overseas, are in particular disadvantage, because many buyers abroad don’t have a clear understanding of shipping costs from the U.S. to international locations, he said.

For others like Witt, DSR-based fee discounts are welcome. "It’s fine to offer incentives to sellers who strive for excellence. That was a good idea and they should expand on it. Offering rewards has always worked better than punishments," she said.

These and other differing viewpoints about the plans reflect the ripple effect that eBay changes inevitably have, since there is such a wide variety of merchants on its platform. It remains to be seen whether eBay will want, and be able to refine further, its planned changes to achieve - as much as possible - a happy medium across its vast community of sellers.

Weight-Loss, Anti-Aging Spammer Shut Down

A U.S. judge has ordered a Las Vegas company to stop making weight-loss and anti-aging claims and to stop sending unsolicited e-mail, the U.S. Federal Trade Commission announced Monday.

Judge David Coar of the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Illinois, Eastern Division, has also ordered Sili Neutraceuticals and owner Brian McDaid to pay nearly US$2.6 million for allegedly making false advertising claims and sending e-mail messages in violation of the FTC Act and the CAN-SPAM (Controlling the Assault of Non-Solicited Pornography and Marketing) Act.

In the Jan. 23 ruling, Coar also ordered the operation, doing business as Kaycon, to stop misrepresenting any products or services, including products made from the hoodia plant and human-growth-hormone-related (HGH) products. In August 2007, the FTC charged the defendants with CAN-SPAM violations and making false and unsubstantiated claims about hoodia weight-loss products and HGH anti-aging products.

Coar found that the defendants violated the FTC Act by falsely claiming that the hoodia products cause rapid, substantial and permanent weight loss, and that the HGH products will turn back or reverse the aging process. The company had claimed that users of hoodia products could lose up to 40 pounds in a month, according to the FTC complaint. The HGH products could supposedly reduce cellulite, improve vision, cause new

hair growth and improve emotional stability.

The FTC accused the defendants of sending commercial e-mail messages that had misleading subject headings, that failed to include opt-out provisions and that failed to include the senders' valid postal address.

Sili Neutraceuticals didn't have a listed phone number in Las Vegas.

Canadian Court Hands Rare Internet Hate Crime Conviction

A Canadian court handed down a rare conviction to a white supremacist for posting hate material on the Internet, police here said Tuesday.

A judge ruled that Keith Francis William (Bill) Noble, 31, did "willfully promote hatred against identifiable groups, namely Jews, Blacks, homosexual or gay persons, non-whites and persons of mixed race or ethnic origin," said a police statement.

Noble was sentenced to four months in jail, plus restrictions on his use of computers for three years, said the police statement. He was charged after police raided his former home in the rural community of Fort St. John.

Monday's conviction by the British Columbia Supreme Court in western Canada, following a two-week trial last fall, is unusual, Sergeant Sean McGowan told AFP. "The conviction rate for Internet-related crimes is very low."

"This is the second conviction of an individual for hate propaganda in British Columbia, and there have been only four or five cases in all of Canada where an individual has been prosecuted and convicted for hate over the Internet," said McGowan.

McGowan said police were tipped off about Noble's posting by the Friends of the Simon Wiesenthal Center For Holocaust Studies, an international human rights organization.

Nobel "posted quite a bit on a lot of white supremacist websites," said McGwan. "The content of the website and the content of what he posted were offensive enough to meet a high standard."

Noble "was known to the police, the authorities, and to our organization," said David Eisenstadt, a spokesman for the Wiesenthal organization.

"We're pleased this (conviction) has happened, not because we condone censorship but because there's a lot of abuse on the Internet," Eisenstadt told AFP. "There are no boundaries on the Internet."

Italy Takes Jewish Teachers "Blacklist" Off Internet

Italian police are investigating an anti-Semitic blog listing the names of more than 150 "Jewish university professors," which was removed from the Internet after protests from politicians and Jewish leaders.

The blog, by an anonymous author, listed the names and workplaces of university professors which it accused of "publicly and politically" supporting Israel.

It was taken down in the early afternoon on Friday, said Emanuele Fini, one of the heads of blog site www.ilcannocchiale.it, where the blog was first posted on January 16.

Interior Minister Giuliano Amato ordered police to investigate the case.

"The Internet has become the main tool for spreading anti-Semitic hatred," said Alessandro Ruben of the Anti-Defamation League in Italy.

Education Minister Giuseppe Fioroni called the blog a shameful "kind of Ku Klux Klan of the digital age."

The blog had links to far-right websites and themes like Holocaust revisionism, appeals to boycott Israel and war-time fascist dictator Benito Mussolini. Some professors listed on the blog are not Jewish but had signed pro-Israel petitions.

There was a heated debate earlier this month on whether Italy’s biggest book fair had a right to invite top Israeli writers as special guests.

The Turin annual fair, which this year will run from May 8-12, invited Amos Oz, David Grossman and Abraham Yehousha to mark Israel’s 60th anniversary. The decision sparked protests by some leftists, who felt the fair was taking a political stance and called for a boycott of its stands.

Users’ Bad Habits Invite Malware

Some estimates suggest spyware problems in the U.S. are decreasing, but writers of all kinds of malware are prevailing - partly because of computer user behavior, antispyware experts said last week.

Computer users run outdated antivirus software, operating systems and browsers because they’re scared of change, said Janie "CalamityJane" Whitty, administrator of security software vendor Lavasoft’s online support forums.

Whitty sees people running a 2003 version of antivirus software, she said during an Anti-Spyware Coalition conference in Washington, D.C. "The nature of malware has changed since 2003," she said.

In addition to problems caused by users, there’s a healthy underground market for the kinds of data compromised by spyware and other malware, said Stefan Savage, director of the Collaborative Center for Internet Epidemiology and Defenses at the University of California in San Diego. The center monitored a popular malware-trading IRC forum for about six months in 2006 and found the advertised value of compromised bank accounts offered there was US$54 million.

While some estimates show the spyware problem shrinking, U.S. companies and consumers are losing the battle against malware in general, Savage said. Antivirus vendors, in unguarded moments, will

say they’re able to catch less and less malware as criminals become more sophisticated, he said.

The chances of an Internet fraudster getting caught are "virtually zero," he added.

"By any objective measure... this is something we end up losing on," Savage said. "The more money these guys make, the more money they can invest to get better."

The panel on consumer behavior kicked off a day-long session on fighting
spyware, during which many experts said they continue to have major concerns about spyware and other malware. Those concerns remain despite Consumer Reports’ annual estimate of spyware that suggests the problem is declining. The magazine estimated that 850,000 U.S. households had to replace computers in the first half of 2007, with the cost of fighting spyware at $1.7 billion for the year. In 2006, spyware cost U.S. individuals and businesses an estimated $2.6 billion, the magazine said.

Part of the problem is that people hang on to outdated operating systems and browsers, even though newer ones have better security controls, because they don’t want to learn how to operate the new software, Whitty said. "The malware changes," she said. "If we don’t change with it, they’re going to win."

Computer users seem to be of two minds when it comes to giving up personal information, added Susannah Fox, associate director at the Pew Internet and American Life Project, a research organization. Many young computer users will refuse to disclose personal information to e-commerce sites, she said. "But yet this is the same group that is putting their whole lives" on social-networking sites, she said. One private detective has told Fox that social-networking sites make it significantly easier to track down details about people, Fox said.

$1 Million Adds A Letter S to An Internet Address

It may be the most ever paid for a single letter of an Internet address.

A British travel company has paid 560,000 pounds ($1.1 mln) for the domain name cruises.co.uk, a price that is effectively $1 million just for the letter "S" since it already owns the address cruise.co.uk.

The sum shatters the previous record for a .co.uk domain of $300,000, paid in October last year.

Seamus Conlon, whose company bought the address from a German travel company, said it was a necessary move to retain dominance in the rapidly growing market for ocean cruising.

"’Cruises’ is consistently ranked first on Google, with ’cruise’ just behind," he said.

"We wanted the top positions so that when Internet users are searching for deals ... we are the first port of call."

While the purchase is a record for Britain, it is a long way behind the huge sums paid for more the popular .com addresses.

The current most-expensive domain is sex.com, which was bought for $12 million in 2005. Running close behind is porn.com, snapped up for $9.5 million last year.

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